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On Reconstructing the American Literary Canon

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What are the major works of American literature? About two decades ago, when such a question was asked, any one would quite easily name almost the same works, possibly according to the knowledge he had gotten at school and university. But, since the early eighties, the status of "major works" has been undermined, especially in the United States, so much that not everyone refers to the same works as major except for a few; instead, each one chooses them according to one's own sense of evaluation of literature, or one's own notion of "canon."[1]

With the change of social values, the sense of values in any field has been challenged and remade, and in the field of literature as well, the traditional canon, which was for the most part established in the Victorian Age in Britain, is being challenged. Recently, the reformation of the canon has been the principal theme in literary criticism:

> More recently, the idea of a general literary *canon* has received attention from a critical viewpoint, and the process of *canon*-formation has been interpreted as the work of part of society to make its own labors central and to reduce the work of others to marginal or trivial status outside the *canon*. For instance, the "traditional" romantic canon (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelly, Keats) excludes the many publishing women writers of the age. The *canon* controversy has been one of the most formative influences on the study of literature in the second half of the twentieth century. (*Handbook* 70)

This tendency of questioning the literary canon can be seen in Britain, and yet, such a controversy has been a more remarkable and critical problem in the United States, because the American society is historically destined to reflect its sociological movements more sensitively and more directly. Then, through this essay, we will attempt to investigate the tendency of questioning the canon of literature and to highlight some intrinsic problems of such a controversy.

I

First of all, we must explore the causes for this reformation of the literary canon. On September 4, 1985, the following article on a problem in higher education appeared:

> The dominant concern of literary study during the rest of the 1980's will be literary theory. Especially important will be the use of theory informed by the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to gain insights into the cultures of blacks and women.
>
> In fact, the convergence of feminist and Afro-American theoretical formulations offers the most challenging nexus for scholarship in the coming years....
>
> Such theoretical accounts of the cultural products of race and gender will help to undermine the half-truths that white males have established as constituting American culture as a whole. One aspect of that development will be the continued reshaping of the literary canon as forgotten, neglected, or suppressed texts are rediscovered. (*Baker* 13)

As this article suggests, one of the main causes lies in the recent development of literary criticism. Since Jacques Derrida proclaimed "deconstruction theory"[2] in the eighties, discussions on literary theories have become more popular and a variety of critical approaches have lively and severely been applied to literary texts. Peter Widdowson points out that critical studies are being made on a fullscale: "...received notions of the whole 'discipline' of Literary Studies are fundamentally challenged" (2). Consequently, quite naturally, the values of many literary works are re-criticized from various new viewpoints. A new viewpoint constructs a new canon of literature, which recommends its favorite works the traditional canon has missed.

Particularly, sociological approaches, such as Feminism and New Historicism,[3] have been principal and powerful in literary criticism. It can be regarded as an enormous contribution to the development of American literature that, as the above article points out, "forgotten, neglected, or suppressed texts are re-discovered." But, behind such a re-discovery, "the half-truths that white males have established as constituting American culture as a whole" have been undermined.

Another cause we can adduce is the civil rights movements which started in the sixties in the United States; since then, American society has put a considerable emphasis on gender, class, culture in any field. As a result, a canon based on Feminism and New Historicism is created.

As a third cause, as well as the development of professional criticism, Widdowson adds the rise of the English language in Britain and the U. S.: "Equally significant, perhaps, was the development ... of professional criticism, and the concurrent rise of 'English' in Britain and America as an important factor in the higher education" (3). With the social rise of English as an international language, the number of the people who learn English is increasing all over the world. It is true that few of them think it is necessary to read English

literature chosen by the orthodoxical, traditional canon, neither do their teachers. This tendency is stronger and more serious in the multilingual American society where a great many people of different origins do not demand more than English as a practical tool for everyday living.

It is against universities, especially literary classes, that this new wave has given a quite practical attack. At universities, what kind of texts constitute their syllabus for literature classes has been a practical problem, because professors are never unaffected by the cultural movement of the age in which they are living now and never weigh the old great works apparently far away from the present; they cannot dismiss it as a useless factor for the evaluation of literature, as Hillis Miller explains in "The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time":

> Most professors in departments of literature still assume that their chief responsibility is teaching students how to read "primary texts." The context or situation in which that duty is performed, however, has changed radically from what it was thirty years ago. The old consensus in literary studies in the United States, such as it was, has been challenged in manifold ways. There is now, for example, widespread disagreement about just what those "primary" texts ought to be and about how they ought to be organized in courses and curricula. (*Teaching Literature* 87)

We can recall various types of discussionis held at universities both in Britain and the U. S. Front-page news in a quality paper[4] was a bitter debate in the University of Cambridge English faculty in 1981 about what should constitute an English "syllabus"; and there was a similar debate at Oxford in 1980.

In the U. S. quite recently, in 1991, reflecting the powerful re-shaping of the canon, there was a panel at Boston University, in which twenty-two scholars, both traditional and revolutionary, made speeches about the recent trend of canon reformation; these speeches are specially reported by *Partisan Review* (Vol. 58 1991) entitled "The Changing Culture of the University."

It is quite interesting and important to mention the new version of *the Heath Anthology of American Literature*,[5] which was published for a university textbook in 1990 as a product of the revolutionary notion of the literary canon, and fueled the canon controversy. This anthology is edited by Paul Lauter as "an anthology of unprecedented richness, one which realizes the goal of an expanded American Literature canon" ("Preface" to the new edition). This 5,000-page book consists of about 300 authors who are chosen by thousands of professors of American universities, although, as Toshio Watanabe points out after his close examination of it, Lauter's "canon" is too limited to women, Afro-Americans, and minorities, so it never "expands" the American literature canon, and cannot take up the position as the

new canon of American Literature.

Thus, the canon reformation is the primary concern of literary studies, reflecting various sociological trends of the present-day society, and at the same time, literary validity is inevitably opened to question.

II

Through this chapter, let us fathom the intrinsic problems in the canon reformation. As principal, we will discuss three themes involved in this controversy, which are closely connected with the reasons for questioning the canon already explored in the previous chapter.

The most significant and profound theme of the three is the validity of literature. On this point, in "The Crisis in English Studies," Widdowson points out as follows:

> In recent years in Britain (as in America and elsewhere), there has been a growing debate amongst radical critics about the value of 'Literature'; about the principles by which we evaluate different literary productions; and, indeed, about the validity of the category 'Literature' itself. (2)

What is literature?—this fundamental question ought to be asked anew in discussing the literary canon; furthermore, even literature's "reason for being" is inevitably opened to question. What kind of factors constitute "literature"? What kind of elements decide a text as belonging to literature? Does such a "great" work as has long been valued beyond time and place exist? The canon controversy asks us these fundamental questions about literature.

It is pointed out in *A Glossary* that timelessness is not a criterion for literary value as follows:

> Literary value judgements could no longer lay claim to being justified by reference to a single standard of literary quality or excellence. . . . Thus literary evaluations and rankings could no longer lay claim to timelessness; not only were they culture-bound, class-bound, perhaps gender-bound: they were also time-bound. (26)

Sociological viewpoints are taken into great consideration in literary evaluation. Their philosophy of evaluation is based on such an idea as Terry Eagleton advocates in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*:

> There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. 'Value' is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes. ("Questioning the 'Canon'" 22)

It is true that the widening of the canon has made a valuable contribution to the discovery of great feminine authors, some of whom are certain to last, and yet, if their criterion is limited only to sociological elements, those texts chosen by such a narrow viewpoint may not last long, if of temporary or contemporary value, because of the lack of universality.

A second problem this controversy presents is: academism vs. pop culture, or traditionalism vs. contemporariety. The reshaping of the canon is quite an American type of revolution. Historically speaking, the United States has proceeded against the traditional system: Americans generally dislike hierarchy and tradition. It was not until the rise of realism that American literature could be called as such: American Realism, we must remember, developed against the "genteel tradition."

With the development of capitalism, traditional systems and ideas have declined, and instead pop culture has prevailed so powerfully that it has exerted a considerable influence upon other cultures all over the world. As a result, pop culture, with the growth of American economics, has attained the highest stage of prosperity almost all over the world. Through the shaping of the canon we find the diversity of American literature, which is constituted by various types of authors who have different social origins and their own themes produced by their background and circumstances.

The canon controversy is one of the social phenomena caused by the American admiration of liberation and diversity against hierarchical traditionalism. In other words, the canon controversy is a battlefield between the older generation and the younger, as Leslie Fiedler observes in "Literature as an Institution: The View from 1980":

> The former definition was sustained by succeeding generations of old-style professors, the sons, or less often the daughters, of the original American ruling class, who were sometimes eccentric but always genteel.... their tastes were determined by the values of Victorian England, which, to be sure, they believed to be universal and immortal, though they were being challenged.... However, those self-styled avant-gardists and experimentalists seemed to their opponents to be juvenile and perverse, and their francophile assault on the Anglo-Saxon/Germanic canon seemed to be more a bad joke than a real threat. (74)

Old-style professors insist on universality of literature, sticking to "Anglo-Saxon/Germanic canon" constructed by old academism and the value of Victorian England, whereas younger ones claim the contemporariety of literature, according to their sense of the age. For example, Christopher Ricks, professor of Cambridge University at the 1981 debate, maintains: "it is our job to teach and uphold the canon of English literature," (*The Guardian* 17th Jan. 1981), and Helen Vendler, professor of Harvard, insists in "What We Have Loved": "we owe it to ourselves to teach what we love" (*Teaching Literature* 25), quoting Wordsworth's

phrase. Cleanth Brooks, invited to the panel at Boston University, points out the younger critics' political concern as follows:

> The newest critics, then, having rejected literary merit as the basis for any canon, frankly accept political concerns as the warrant for selecting our great books and go on to indicate the aim of their own political concerns: they want to create a new, more democratic society. America is increasingly multicultural. ("The Remaking of the Canon" 354)

Furthermore, he wonders if their judgment biased for ethnic people can be called "social therapy":

> This new plan is indeed democratic in the sense that it sees that everybody gets represented. Everyone (or at least most of us) will find something in his studies that should make him feel at home.
>
> The sentiment is indeed generous in spirit. Who wants anyone to feel left out? But as for culture and education, the scheme is hopeless, for it rests on a complete misunderstanding of what literature can give and needs to give to any culture. It shifts the issue from the acquisition of knowledge and disciplines to that of social therapy. It can be argued that such a notion is un-American. (354)

Thus, Brooks emphasizes the danger of their demand of "political correctness" on literature. Watanabe, who also explains similar danger of PC in literary evaluation, maintains such a perspective is too narrow.

A third point behind the controversy is the change of the position of the English language. Both in Britain and the U.S., English was a native language and it is even now, but that dominant position is being invaded by the world-wide acceptance of English as an international language. This is particularly so in the U.S., where multi-racial people live and speak their own language, as Hillis Miller explains in "The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time":

> American society has begun to recognize that we are to a considerable degree a multilingual people, not only because many of us have Spanish or some other tongue as a first language but because we speak and write many different forms of English besides the idiolect and grapholect of standard English. For better or worse, much "standard English as a second language" must be taught, even to college students. (*Teaching Literature* 90-91)

More and more people are thinking of English not as a language of a nation which has a long history and rich culture, but as a mere medium for international communication. There is a tendency that few people living in the U.S. whose mother tongue is not English think it is necessary to study old English literature chosen by the Anglo Saxon canon of literature, as

Miller points out:

> The reading of works of literature appears every day to be playing a less and less important role in our culture generally. The complex social function performed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England by going to the theater and in Victorian England by the reading of novels is performed these days by other activities, mostly, so it seems, by watching television. The reading of a novel, a poem, or a play, or even the watching of a play, is likely to become an increasingly artificial, marginal, or archaic activity. (*Teaching Literature* 90)

Equally, in the field of English education, "difficult" English literature is not thought to be good material. In "Repossessing the Past: The Case for an Open Literary History," Marilyn Butler explains the example in China: "Most school students of English language are sitting, right now, at desk in China: they do not study English literature" ("Questioning the 'Canon'" 10). At best, literature may remain as a model of good writing, as Miller suggests:

> The study of the great works of English, not to speak of American, literature will remain fundamental, for its models of good writing, if for no other reason. . . . That this would be a catastrophe for the professors of literature there can be no doubt. Deans, provosts, and presidents these days are a little dubious about the function of the study of literature. In fact many of them have always been dubious. They have tended to assume that the real function of departments of English is to teach good writing. Good writing they understand, or think they do, and are willing to fund. They are much less willing to fund the study of literature, particularly if the enrollments in courses in Chaucer, Milton, and Wordsworth go down markedly. (*Teaching Literature* 94)

In a word, as Houston Baker points out in "The Introduction" to *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*, the present-day preference to economics is the primary cause for the decline of English literature studies:

> The global ascendency of English as a trade language, as a system giving semantic force to technological views of man and nature, has conditioned the study and evaluation of the English language. . . .
>
> To adopt an explanation grounded in economics alone, however, is to drastically reduce the scope of an inquiry into English as a world language for literature. (ix-x)

It is extraordinarily ironic that the world-wide use of English has caused the decline of its literature studies.

To summarize, the above discussions of the canon controversy can be converged into a question: the canon or canons? In literary evaluation, should we recognize the single standard

of judgment as exclusively absolute and fixed, or can we admit several standards? It may be true that, "in the traditional sense, if there were several canons then there was no canon," (*Glossary* 26) but the recent tendency is directed toward the acceptance of "canons," as the following explanation suggests:

> . . . increasingly the arguments of feminist critics, or of those interested in POPULAR literature, or the literature of ethnic minorities, were directed towards the establishment of alternative, non-universal *canons* rather than towards modifications of *the canon*. (*Glossary* 26)

As we have discussed, this tendency may contain some literary dangers, but we can expect that the widening of the canon will lead to the development of English and American literature. To see from a different viewpoint, now is the time when the worth of long-accepted literary works is truly tested.

NOTES

1. According to *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, the term "canon" is defined as follows: "a list of works set apart from other literature by virtue of their literary quality and importance" (25). This term defined as the above is quite new, because few dictionaries define the term as such—not the second edition of *the O. E. D.*

2. According to *A Handbook to Literature*, "Deconstruction thus aims to undermine Western metaphysics by undoing or deconstructing these hierarchical oppositions. . ." (48).

3. According to *A Handbook*, "The New Historicism tends to be social, economic, and political, and it views literary works . . . as instruments for displaying and enforcing of doctrines about conduct, etiquette, and law" (318).

4. See, for further information, *The Guardian,* 17th January 1981. The title is "Dons split in English Faculty rift."

5. Lauter emphasizes the necessity of the widening of the canon in "Forum: What Do We Need to Teach?" in *American Literature* 65. 2 (1993): 327-330.

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